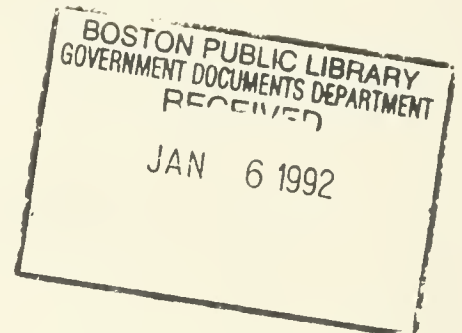


COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE REPORT  
ON THE  
BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

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William H. Ohrenberger

June 30, 1971



COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE

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Community Relations and Student Relations  
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Richard C. Hardy, English High School  
President, Boston Student Advisory Council 1970-71

William J. Harrison  
Assistant Superintendent  
Boston Public Schools

Mrs. Roseanna J. McCourt, Special Manager  
Boston Home and School Association

Tom Morrison, Boston Latin School  
Member, Boston Student Advisory Council 1970-71

John P. Reilly, President  
Boston Teacher's Union



COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE REPORT TO THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

I INTRODUCTION

In response to a communication from the then Boston City Councilor Louise Day Hicks regarding a pattern of violent incidents both within and immediately outside the Boston schools, the Boston School Committee appointed a non-salaried commission on October 2, 1970 to investigate charges of disruption and violence and charged the Commission with the task of reporting back to the School Committee at an unspecified date with findings and recommendations concerning these disruptions.

This action was followed by an order of the Boston City Council.

ORDERED: That the Boston City Council will fully support the efforts and help in every way to implement the findings of the aforementioned Commission, and so indicate to the membership of the Boston School Committee. IN CITY COUNCIL, October 5, 1970. PASSED

The following persons were invited to serve on this Commission by the Superintendent of Schools:

COMMISSION CHAIRMAN

William L. Phipps, Executive Secretary  
Retail Trade Board of Boston

EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

S. J. Messina, Consultant  
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It was quickly determined that the findings of this report would be based exclusively on information gathered during sessions held by the Commission and from hearings and questionnaires distributed in selected schools.

To do this effectively the Commission decided that the investigation would be based on two approaches:

1. by hearing direct and voluntary testimony from the students, faculty, and administration at each of the selected schools
2. by preparing questionnaires which would be answered anonymously by parents, teachers, students, and administration.





For two months the Commission wrestled with the problem of the questionnaires:

1. the types of questions that should be asked
2. the categories of response
3. the area to which the questions should be directed
4. the proper evaluation of the results of the questionnaires.

As a result 25,000 questionnaires were prepared, distributed to the schools being studied, and completed.

The Commission then arranged for interviews at the selected junior and senior high schools. The Commission is indeed grateful to the many persons whose cooperation made this report possible: parents, students, teachers, and particularly to the school administrators whose hospitality made our visits most pleasant. Moreover, we are grateful to those who voluntarily testified; for their candor and for the deep concern they showed for the pupils and for our schools. Their testimony provided an indispensable ingredient of this report whose contents, we hope, will contribute to a more meaningful educational environment. Once again the Commission wishes to commend all those who assisted in the preparation of these findings.

## II FINDINGS

The following findings, arranged under an assortment of topics, were reached by a consensus of the Commission members after long and very trying hours of discussion. The Commission concentrated solely on "causes" of disruption and unrest. This, in fact, was its charge.

It should be noted that the Commission prefers a group response to those who question this report. Although this report is the result of individual contributions, based on objective evidence, it is, nevertheless, a group effort.



#### A. Administration

Unquestionably the administrator is the key person in the prevention of violence in the schools. Principals and head masters who have a deep commitment to education, who maintain a single standard, who mingle constantly with students and teachers, and who perform public and community relations functions usually run satisfactory schools.

Administrative problems on the school level have developed because of confusion and misunderstanding of administrative policies and procedures.

#### B. Teaching

If there was one message stated repeatedly by pupils it was this: classes are boring. There is a crying need for innovation. Teachers who communicate relevant course content in a dull, perfunctory manner were criticized.

It must also be mentioned that less experienced teachers often times experimented with their curriculum but too frequently at the expense of classroom discipline and learning. Finally, in a related matter some teachers seemed to find the everyday language of students offensive and frightening, particularly when it is sprinkled with words that teachers consider off-color or obscene. Some students claim that teaching is often impaired or even halted by the inability of teachers to accept some students' language.

#### C. Reading and Educational Disabilities

Perhaps one of the highest contributing educational factors in the disruption of classes is the inability of many students to read. Students turn away from learning when they are confronted by material they are unable to deal with due to reading deficiencies. Boredom and restlessness inevitably lead to disruptive behavior.



#### D. Communication

Communications are ineffective, if they exist at all, between many different factions and elements within the school system. Perhaps the first observation that the Commission noted was the many worlds that exist within the same school. Very often a desire on the part of students to communicate by means of offensive language is not read as vernacular but rather as a sign of intimidation. However, it was noted by the Commission that some students intentionally employ this device to demean. Although efforts are being made to correct and overcome these language barriers, little dialogue currently exists between differing interest groups. One vehicle of student communication, the student councils, is generally regarded as unrepresentative. Perhaps the most general complaint is "No one listens to us!"

#### E. Insensitivity

Numerous students point to instances where teachers and administrators do not project themselves with the sensitivity required to deal with the influences of the students' home conditions, economic problems, and personality development. It is quite commonplace for teachers who come from the suburbs to make little or no effort to acquaint themselves with the neighborhood in which they teach.

#### F. Rumor

In no single area was there greater unanimity regarding the cause of violent incidents than with rumor and its effect on the school's proper equilibrium. Simple incidents can easily be distorted or exaggerated. Rumor, given credence by newspapers, television, and word of mouth, was often allowed to run rampant, with administrators unable to get facts in order to ascertain the truth. Rumors which often seemed to grip a school and a community contributed to greater unrest and to disruption.





#### G. Student Involvement

Students feel that major decisions are made without their meaningful input. Most participants feel that student councils do not deal with meaningful issues which would give real leadership to the students. Because of the ineffective role of the student councils, their elections become mere popularity contests.

The Commission felt that many students had strong perceptions of school problems and that their comments are untapped sources of information.

#### H. Community Participation

Most school officials expect parents and community leaders to support their programs. But there are indications that community support is not solicited until a crisis occurs. The readiness of parents and community leaders to help maintain order in some of our schools during this past year's unrest clearly indicates their commitment to order and to quality education.

#### I. Inadequate and Depressing Facilities

Even in light of budgetary restrictions, the almost unanimous feeling is that physical surroundings are a serious contributing cause of discontent. Vandalism, many feel, would be greatly minimized by accelerated repairs in the schools. A general physical deterioration in the schools is a direct cause of institutional disrespect. The Commission noted that in schools which enjoyed good administrator-student-community relationships vandalism is much lower.

#### J. Poverty

The economic level of the student's home is, in most cases, related to his behavior in the classroom. Many students come to school hungry; others come to school exhausted.





from evening jobs they must hold; still others show the results of permissive, of absent, or of abusive parents. All these factors result in many poor students coming to school "up tight" - frustrated and angry. The consequences of poverty are often overlooked as the causes of violence in our schools.

#### K. Hatred and Hostility

It is agreed by most that racial tension plays a part in violence in the schools. However, hard core haters, both black and white, are in the small minority. Estimates are that these students are from ten to fifteen percent on both extremes. During the crises this year, many others because of peer pressure became involved on one side or the other. The large majority, however, returned to a more moderate position once the pressure eased. In many cases, this hostility has been manifested by student-on-student assault and, in some cases, student-on-teacher assault. Pockets of hate and hostility are real and very significant factors of school violence. Segregationists, white and black, are ready to exploit every opportunity for disrupting the school. The tolerance that exists between some white students and some black students is on the surface only. Time for constructive action is running out if we are going to prevent further polarization.

#### L. Extortion

There is no question in the minds of the Commission that extortion does exist in varying degrees in our junior and senior high schools. Often enough, the extortionist is a youngster who needs money to finance his drug habit. Students who will not submit to extortion react, often in a volatile fashion. Fights and arguments often break out; students decline to identify extortionists for fear of retaliation. In the survey, the answer to the statement "Money is extorted in school" yielded 2718 "Yes" answers and 1807 "NO" answers - some 1127 students answered "Sometimes".



#### M. Drugs

From testimony of students and teachers, it is obvious that drugs are used quite heavily by students of all ages. Testimony disclosed that drug-taking is confined mainly to the use of pills and marijuana, sometimes on school premises. Students responded with only 1527 "No" answers out of 5668 answers to the statement "Drugs are used in school." Equally significant, they answered "No" only 1773 out of 5737 responses to the assertion that "Drugs are bought in school." It must be noted, however, that heroin and hard drug users are in the minority.

Regarding behavior, most administrators and teachers felt a person occasionally "high on drugs" could be very difficult to handle. There was no question that drugs were a very important cause for the increase in stealing and fighting in the schools.

Although student opinion was split on the statement "Students using drugs should be punished," (2419 yes/2329 no), the sentiment was nearly unanimous that present drug education programs were ineffective (4021 yes/820 no). An added frustration for administrators was the difficulty in obtaining medical diagnostic evidence that a student was under the influence of drugs while in school.

Finally, students related very bluntly that the most credible and effective drug programs are conducted by ex-drug addicts presently involved in drug education.

#### N. Outside Influence

There was great disparity, even polarization, between students and faculty about the influence of outside agencies on the behavior of students in school. Teachers averred that outside groups did, in fact, influence students and effect disruption. Students, on the other hand, stated that they almost totally disregarded the pamphlets and exhortation of these groups. To the question that attempts to disrupt school



were made by outside agitators: 2348 students answered "Yes", 1773 students answered "No", and 1304 answered "Sometimes".

It must be noted that outside groups exerted influence on students who were already embroiled in crises, and successfully exploited their intraschool grievances.

#### O. News Media

Interestingly enough, the survey found students not agreeing by a 2 to 1 margin that TV showing of violence in schools adds to further tension, even though testimony was nearly unanimous from all sectors that the mere presence of TV cameras and equipment was almost certain in itself to cause disturbance. The subtle difference between the two is that the news show itself was not the antagonist but rather the reporters and other news personnel, particularly those who allegedly aided and abetted some students in their acts of defiance.

#### P. The School Haters

Students and teachers who addressed themselves to this problem were unanimous in their opinion that there is a small percentage of students who dislike school with an unbelievable intensity. These students, it is alleged, hate school. The plea of all seemed to be to contain these groups within our schools or to devise some means of excluding them.

#### Q. Conclusion

Almost every person interviewed by this Commission echoed in his own way the belief that Boston school problems are only a microcosm of those affecting our larger population. Unrest, anger, poverty, drugs, and confrontation are not unique to our schools or to our city. The pressure of overcrowding in the school symbolize the close proximity and forced cooperation between two life styles a generation apart.





There is little doubt to the daily or even to the casual observer of our school system that our educational system will remain in chaos as long as society at large remains in a state of crisis.

### III RECOMMENDATIONS

#### A. Administration

The Commission agrees with the findings that the Head Master/Principal is the key person in the prevention of violence or disruption in the school.

The Commission believes that the selection of the Head Master/Principal be made from recommendations of the Area Superintendent assisted by the Advisory Council of parents, teachers, and students, and submitted to the Superintendent for nomination.

The Commission also recommends that the Principal or Head Master be placed on tenure after three one-year terms of appointment.

The Commission believes that the academic and personal qualifications of the Principal or Head Master be determined before the vacancy for a particular position in a particular school is announced. The Commission suggests that these qualifications be determined by the Area Superintendent aided by the Advisory Council.

Principals or Head Masters wishing to transfer would be rated like any other candidate applying for this position.

The Commission recommends since the Principal's position is one of ever-increasing accountability for the problem of unrest, that he be given the authority necessary to do the job as the responsible, official head of the school.





If the policy-making body of the school concurs, then the Commission strongly recommends that with the advice of the Advisory Council:

1. The Head Master or Principal be the sole authority in recommending to the Superintendent and to the School Committee:
  - a. the selection and dismissal of teachers
  - b. the selection and dismissal of assistants, department heads, guidance counselors and librarians
  - c. the approval of non-academic personnel within the limits of civil service regulations,
2. The Principal or Head Master should be involved in decision-making to establish priorities of repairs and alterations in his school.
3. The Principal or Head Master should be empowered:
  - a. to conduct investigations, studies, and evaluations of his administration, his teachers, and his students' progress in school
  - b. to make curricular changes in cooperation with the Department of Curriculum Development and to experiment in innovative programs filling local needs consonant with the educational interests of the community.
4. The Head Master or Principal should have the flexibility to arrange special study programs to suit the needs of pupils, and the power to allocate diploma points for these programs with the approval of Area Superintendent:
  - a. individualized study programs for advanced pupils



- b. work-study programs for economically deprived pupils
  - c. special skill programs in art, drama, music, science, industry, and nursing
  - d. part-time free-choice selection of subjects for the "school-hater" in an effort to save him.
4. The Head Master or Principal should have the right to insist that:
- a. the emotionally disturbed pupil when psychologically or psychiatrically identified be removed from regular classes and assigned to a special class and teacher for the emotionally disturbed
  - b. the school disrupter be referred to the School Committee for exclusion or expulsion from the school after due process of censure, warnings, hearings, and an exhaustive effort to retain him in school
  - c. the chronically truant, tardy, absentee pupil or the corridor wanderer be made subject to whatever guidance, restraint, or punishment prescribed for him.

GUIDELINES TO EFFECT THESE EXCLUSIONS AND CONTROLS SHOULD BE CLEARLY STATED SO THAT ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, PARENTS, STUDENTS, AND COMMUNITY LEADERS WILL UNDERSTAND CLEARLY THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE HEAD MASTER OR PRINCIPAL.

B. Teacher

The teacher is in the front lines of education. This is where the action is and it is at this point violence and disruption must be faced realistically. A good



teacher is priceless and can do much to alleviate the problem of student unrest. The teacher should, therefore, be selected with the greatest possible care.

Since he is charged with the selection of teachers, the Principal, aided by his Advisory Council, should be given the right to choose his faculty.

The teacher qualifications should be determined by the principal to suit the requirements of the position: formal or informal classroom; traditional or open classroom instruction; flexible, open-campus school or comprehensive, technical, or Latin-type of studies. Whatever the type of educational offering, the teacher should be one who can make education creative, exciting, inspiring, and stimulating to the student.

Teachers, too, should understand clearly that the effectiveness of their teaching ability will be determined by frequent evaluation of their students. Accountability at all levels of education should be an integral part of quality education in the Boston schools.

The Commission cannot stress too emphatically the importance of teacher orientation prior to instruction. The teacher must understand clearly the kind of school into which he must fit, the policies and procedures to be followed, the types of students who attend, the areas where assistance may be obtained, and the community in which the pupils live.

The Commission recommends workshops before school opening, staff meetings and in-service meetings, handbooks for teacher, pupil information booklets, departmental meetings, individual conferences with administrators focusing on the team aspect of education.



Teachers and administrators should recognize that the paraprofessional is a new dimension in education. To utilize the potential of the paraprofessional, administrators should use great care in personnel selection and should provide an orientation program which stresses the interpersonal relationships of teacher, paraprofessional, and student. The Commission stresses emphatically that the paraprofessional be non-civil service; that the exclusive right of selection and of dismissal of the paraprofessional rest with the principal.

G. Community Participation

The Commission recommends:

1. Parents should be encouraged by the faculty and administrators to be more involved as a strong supportive force in an advisory capacity in the operation of the schools. Fully designed guidelines should be developed so that the roles of teachers, administrators, and parents are mutually understood in order that each will respect the other's rights and authority in school matters.
2. Parent-teacher groups should become more aware of Community agencies in order to develop a broader base of action in seeking out economic opportunities to aid their children, and in obtaining possible assistance in solving social and educational problems. Some Community organizations which have been helpful are our own Home and School Associations, Kiwanis, Police-Community Relations Department, APAC, Mayor's Office of Human Rights, Model Cities, Multi-Services, YMCA, fraternal and church organizations.
3. Administrators should invite and welcome into the schools groups accepted in good standing by the community.





#### D. Poverty

The Commission recommends:

1. Federal and/or State funds should be sought for the purpose of establishing a free breakfast program for needy or parent-neglected children in addition to the existing free lunch program.
2. Funds through Federal and/or State or outside agencies should be sought to provide educational opportunities for needy students.
3. Sensitivity programs be developed within our schools to insure a greater understanding of the educational consequences of poverty.

#### E. Student Involvement

The Commission accepts and encourages the concept of student involvement in school activities and makes the following recommendations:

1. Student Councils should be given a more meaningful role in such areas as curriculum, athletics, recreation, discipline, textbooks, supplies, and alterations and repairs. The Commission's view is justified not only by our hearings but also by answers to our questionnaires. For example; in answer to the statement "The student council should have more influence" - 4205 "Yes", 864 "No", 701 "Sometimes". "Our Student Council is effective"- 1132 "Yes", 2845 "No", 1780 "Sometimes".
2. Teachers and administrators must make a stronger effort to relate to issues raised by students.



3. Head Masters should be accessible to students.
4. The Head Master should schedule periodic meetings with the Student Council.
5. Elections for student council should be governed by procedures designed to focus on leadership qualities of candidates who have awareness of the thinking of students.
6. There should be more participation in national, state, and intra-city student council Conferences for the purpose of exchanging ideas, programs, and planning.
7. A handbook on student rights and responsibilities should be prepared and distributed to all students, teachers, and administrators.

Finally, the Commission wishes to state that while student councils should be used in an advisory capacity, administration must strive whenever possible to take positive action on their recommendations. Headmasters' vetoes on student issues should be explained in detail to the school.

#### F. Hatred and Hostility

The Commission recommends the following:

1. The School Committee should establish a Human Relations Program.
2. Representatives of the news media should be actively involved in continuing conferences with school authorities to develop a dynamic program of action to alleviate hostilities between school and pupils.
3. Programs in intra-mural sports, dramatics, music, and art should be extended and broadened to bring races together in areas of common interest.



4. Students should have freedom to sit with their friends during lunch. Such denial is in a sense repressive. In response to the statement "Students should be allowed to sit with friends in the cafeteria," 5,322 students answered "Yes", 304 answered "No", 234 answered "Sometimes". Administrators should be aware of this strong feeling.

Related to the controversial issue of bussing, the Commission found the following responses to four questions in the students' questionnaires:

1. "Students should be bussed to other schools." - 1779 "Yes", 3205 "No", and 890 "Sometimes".
2. "Is it possible to racially balance all schools?" - 858 "Yes", 2879 "No", and 975 "Sometimes".
3. "Black students should be bussed to white schools." - 1023 "Yes", 3820 "No", and 866 "Sometimes".
4. "White students should be bussed to black schools." - 910 "Yes", 4070 "No", and 777 "Sometimes".

In all four questionnaire items concerning bussing the students uniformly expressed the same sentiments whether the schools were predominantly black or white.

The Commission notes that in view of these preceding facts bussing as a device to achieve racial balance is questionable.

It should also be noted that in hearings black students testified they preferred to be in schools in their own community if quality education were available.



G. Drugs

The Commission recommends:

1. An evaluation be made of the present drug education programs in the Boston Schools to determine their effectiveness.
2. A study of drug education programs in other school systems and communities be made to determine which have proved successful in order to develop a new and more effective program for our schools.
3. In-service drug education programs be organized for teachers, administrators, and non-academic personnel.
4. Preventive programs be activated to stop the sale and use of drugs in school.
5. A declaration of policy be distributed within our schools indicating the intent of school drug programs as "preventive," - no police follow up is to be employed except as a last resort. In addition, drug users will be referred to their parents for clinical assistance.
6. A concerted effort be made to alleviate the high incidence of stealing and extortion.

The Commission suggests that the School Committee urge school medical staff to use all available resources in identifying drug users.





H. Communications

The Commission recommends:

1. The student council orient students to the rules, regulations, and procedures of their school at the beginning of the school year, and reviews these rules periodically during the year.
2. The administrator make known to pupils, parents, and teachers the channels of communication available within the school.
3. The administrator use the anonymously answered questionnaire as a device for ascertaining the concerns and frustrations of pupils, parents, and teachers.
4. The administrator request of the Superintendent permission to suspend classes three times a year for workshops involving staff, students, and parents. The purpose of these workshops would be the improvement of the school.
5. The administration should control the use of the public address system during instructional periods.
6. The administration should permit constructive use of the school public address system as part of a student participation program.
7. To reduce confusion and misunderstandings, administrators above the level of head master/principal open effective two-way channels of communication between themselves and the schools.



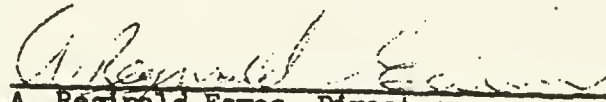
I. Rumor

The Commission recommends:

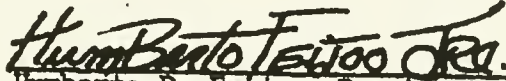
1. The School Committee establish policies regulating the formation of rumor clearing centers in schools and at School Department headquarters.
2. Personnel in charge of rumor centers have prepared listings of the key community agencies that could assist in checking the spread of false rumors.



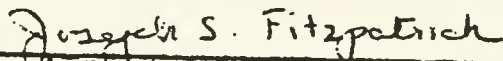
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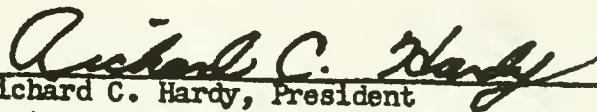
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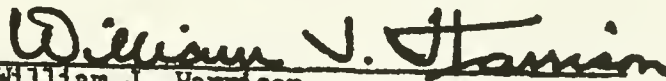
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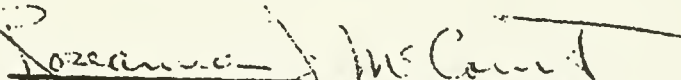
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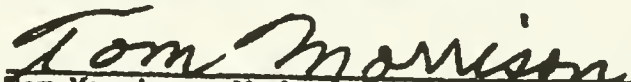
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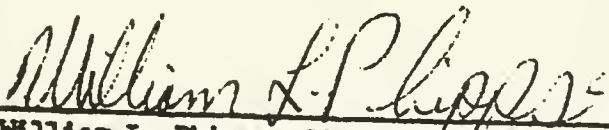
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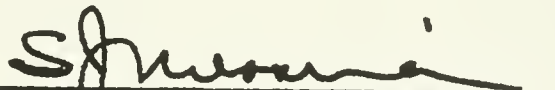
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